

Dean Stockwell
and Scott Bakula
as time travelling
Sam Beckett
and Al Calavicci,
Sam's holographic
advisor

Neil Oseman leaps back to the final season of the cult time-travel show to discover what the series' future might have been.

QUANTUM LEAP: CHANGING HISTORY

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unning for five seasons from 1989-1993, *Quantum Leap* starred Scott Bakula as uber-genius Dr Sam Beckett. The scientist's time-travel experiment has been hijacked by some mysterious higher power, bouncing him around the second half of the twentieth century and compelling him to alter some minor tragedy in history so that he can "leap" to his next temporal destination.

The twist is that he materialises each week not as himself, but in the body of another person somehow connected to the tragedy he must prevent. Everyone around him sees him as the person he has "leapt into", be that person black, white, young, old, male, female or even (in one case) a chimp. One of the show's most famous tropes is the mirror image shot, in which Sam checks out "his" reflection and sees another person staring back at him.

The series' only other regular character is Dean Stockwell's Al Calavicci, Sam's best buddy who – though not having time-travelled himself – can communicate with Sam as a hologram.

Since Al can't touch anything, and no-one can see or hear him but Sam, all he can provide is information and moral support.

The series was the brainchild of Donald P. Bellisario, creator of *Airwolf* and *Magnum, P.I.* He recalled *Quantum Leap*'s genesis in a 1993 interview: "I thought, if I do a time-travel show with a lead or a pair of leads, the audience will really like them and their relationship, and every week, as I do a different story, the audience will really be tuning in for them."

Indeed, the chemistry between Sam and Al is the show's greatest asset. Whilst primarily a drama, *Quantum Leap* has an engaging vein of humour which usually comes from Al – either in his lecherous revelling in his holographic invisibility, or in his lack of perspective when leaving Sam in dire straits in order to attend to some trivial crisis in his busy (but always off-screen) love-life.

SENSE OF REALITY

NBC executives were cautious about Bellisario's pitch. "I don't want to travel too far in time," the writer recalled telling them, "because I want to have some sense of reality to the show." Asked by the execs for an in-universe explanation, Bellisario spontaneously replied, "He can't leap beyond his own lifetime."

Reassured by Bellisario's track record, NBC gave the green light. Premiering in March 1989, with UK broadcasts beginning the following February, *Quantum Leap* was not an immediate hit. After an initial run of 13 episodes, the show truly found its feet in season two. It was then that memorable details like the glowing portal of Al's imaging chamber door and Sam's "Oh boy!" catch-phrase fell into place.

Meanwhile, strong episodes like *Jimmy* (tackling attitudes towards the disabled), *M.I.A.* (in which Sam rejects the chance to reunite Al with his wife Beth) and *Good Morning, Peoria* (a pastiche of *Good Morning Vietnam*) displayed the range of heart, humour and issues that would come to define the show. 🐟





Quantum Leap acquired a number of awards including five Primetime Emmys, but by the end of the third season ratings were falling, with only a *Star Trek*-style fan campaign saving Bellisario's baby from the axe. "I received about seven million letters," claimed the president of the NBC network.

Season four's premiere saw Sam and Al temporarily switch places, with Sam spending the episode as a hologram and Al marvelling at a borrowed reflection. Things were also being shuffled behind the scenes, with NBC bouncing the series around in the TV schedules, unsure what to do with it.

TAKING LIBERTIES

Going into the fifth season, Bellisario must have known that it could be the last. Perhaps because of this, he decided to take numerous liberties with the established format.

There had hitherto been an unwritten rule that Sam would never leap into or change the lives of anyone famous. Although many episodes featured a "kiss with history" in which the good Dr Beckett would bump into a contemporary figure, the plots were never built around these encounters. However, season five kicked off with a feature-length special which saw Sam taking over the body of JFK's assassin Lee Harvey Oswald, and later included episodes where he became Marilyn Monroe's chauffeur, celebrity sex therapist Dr Ruth Westheimer and even Elvis.

Such episodes tend to strain the viewer's suspension of disbelief; somehow we can buy

Sam hopping around in history fixing the lives of fictional nobodies, but to postulate that we have him to thank for Jacqueline Kennedy's survival of her husband's assassination is a trickier pill to swallow.

The Waiting Room – the place at Project Quantum Leap where the people Sam has replaced are temporarily accommodated – was often mentioned but never seen in the series' first four seasons. In season five not only was it shown regularly, but more than one episode made Al's therapeutic conversations with the "leapees" in the Waiting Room a key part of that episode's mission, without which Sam could not leap.

The episode 'Killin' Time' took a slightly different take on this, revealing that if the 'leapee' is not in the Waiting Room then Sam can't leap no matter how successfully history has been changed. Of course this revelation is sparked by the escape of that episode's leapee – a serial killer – and Al is forced to pursue the man and bring him back.

This pursuit gave us a greater glimpse of the future which Sam and Al came from (1999!) than any other episode before or since, and that's just one example of the increased sci-fi content of *Quantum Leap*'s final season.

It's likely that many regular viewers were not sci-fi fans in general, watching the show more for its dramatic elements. After all, apart from the time-travel premise which kicked off each episode, there was very little in the way of science fiction

Clockwise from above: Scott Bakula and Dean Stockwell; With Carolyn Lowery in 'Killin' Time'; With Renée Coleman, and Carolyn Seymour in 'Deliver Us From Evil'; Scott materialises in 'Mirror Image'; Scott and Kate McNeil in 'Leap Between the States'



during those first four seasons. Not so with season five. Mid-way through the season, the show's creative team introduced Alia (Renée Coleman), the Evil Leaper. The yin to Sam's yang, Alia also bounced around in time, also occupied others' bodies, also had a holographic observer, and also yearned to get home. The only difference was that her leaps were driven by how much death and destruction she could cause. Alia featured in two further episodes, shows replete with techno-babble and visual effects which, while greatly expanding the series' lore, likely put off less sci-fi-inclined viewers.

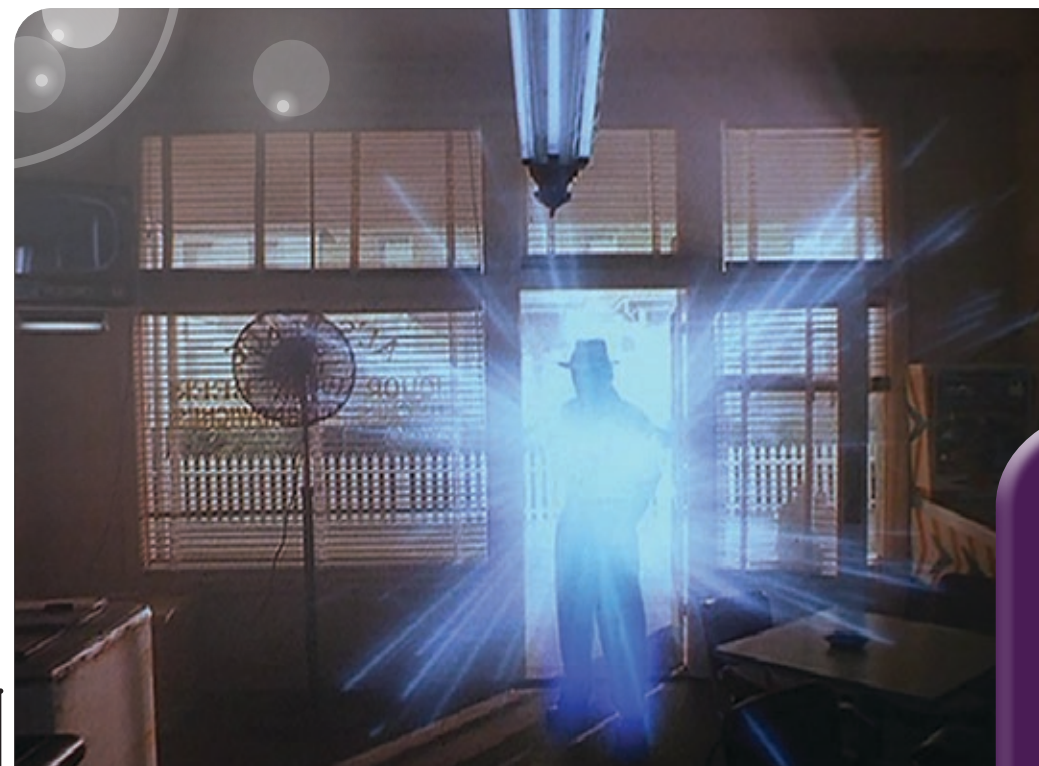
The Evil Leaper episodes weren't the only ones to break the show's procedural format with a multiple-episode arc. The aptly named 'Trilogy' comprised three interconnected leaps, giving us a glimpse of what happens to people and communities after Sam has leapt out. Finally, and perhaps the most solid rule to be broken, was when Sam became a civil war soldier in 'The Leap Between the States' in complete defiance of the introduction's immortal line: "Theorising that one could time-travel within his own lifetime...".

This is explained by the leapee being an ancestor of Sam's, and a suggestion that he can leap across greater temporal distances provided that fragments of his own DNA are involved.)

On their DVD commentary for *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl*, writers Ted Elliott and Terry Rossio discuss a concept they call 'Squeezing the Lemon,' the premise being that if you have a good idea then your script should exploit every possible angle of it. After four years of playing safe, *Quantum Leap*'s closing season was finally gripping the citrus fruit and extracting the maximum possible pulp, but breaking so many established boundaries in one season arguably smacked of a production team who knew they were on borrowed time.

At the time of writing the season five finale, Bellisario still did not know if a sixth season would be commissioned. He therefore concocted a script that could function either as a suitable conclusion or as a set-up for a bold new direction the next year.

'Mirror Image,' which turned out to be the last ever episode, finds Sam reunited with his own reflection in a bar tended by a mysterious man called, coincidentally, Al. The bartender hints that he may have been controlling Sam's leaps, and



warns him that they are about to get harder. While the transmitted episode closes with the poignant caption declaring "Dr Sam Beckett [sic] never returned home", scripts for alternate endings have been kicking around the internet for some time.

"The following scene is an example of how we could cliffhang into the 1993/1994 season," reads the February 22nd, 1993 draft of *Mirror Image* in its closing pages. Al Calavici is scripted as being in conversation with his now-reunited wife Beth, in his den at Project Quantum Leap, when he makes the decision to time-travel himself in search of Sam. He materialises at the mysterious bar and is told by his namesake the bartender that if he wishes to aid his old friend he will no longer enjoy the safety of being an intangible hologram. Accepting the challenge, Al leaps "far into the future" and into the body of a woman at "a space station bar" before uttering the inevitable "Oh boy!"

For many years fans assumed that this sequence had never made it beyond the page, but in 2018 photographs emerged appearing to show

the den scene. The next year raw footage surfaced to vanquish any doubts, 26 years after it had been filmed. Whether the more outlandish scene in the bar full of "space warriors" ever made it before the cameras remains unknown, though surviving paperwork proves that it was at least scheduled.

Such an exotic cliffhanger departs radically from Bellisario's original vision of having "some sense of reality to the show"; it seems that season five's format tinkering was merely the tip of an intended iceberg. We can only guess where the new concepts introduced in the final season and this alternate ending might have taken the series. More leapers? More multi-episode story arcs? More action set at Project Quantum Leap or in the distant future?

Might we one day see some of these ideas in a Netflix or Amazon reboot, a search for Sam at last? If *Doctor Who* can return after 16 years and Jean-Luc Picard can make a comeback after almost 20, who's to say that Dr Beckett's next leap couldn't be the leap home? 🦋